

THE EFFECT OF BRAND-CAUSE FIT ON CONSUMERS' RESPONSES TO
CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING

A study on young Vietnamese consumers

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Objectives: Given the contentious debate regarding the role of brand-cause fit in cause-related marketing, this thesis aims to, first and foremost, compare the perceived value of high and low brand-cause fit. From then, the study seeks to gain more insight into the significance of high (versus low) brand-cause fit in shaping consumers' purchase intention. Finally, this thesis explores if and how other factors can affect the way consumers perceive brand-cause fit.

Summary: This study, which targets Vietnamese young consumers, uses qualitative data collection method to fulfill the above objectives. Two focus groups were conducted to examine consumers' purchase intention, using a choice-selection activity that features different brand-cause links of different level of fit. A discussion session then takes place in a semi-structured form to understand how consumers perceive brand-cause fit as well as the impact of fit and other factors on purchase intention.

Conclusions: The results support the major consensus across different literature that a high brand-cause fit elicits more positive response than a low one does. However, the impact of brand-cause fit on purchase intention is very transient and most noticeable only in the first few moments of product evaluation. The combination of brand-cause fit and other factors might lead consumers to either evaluate more on the fit or ignore the fit and consider other aspects of the product. The more consumers evaluate on a low fit, the more likely they are to become skeptical. However, given the limited sample, such results shouldn't be used to represent Vietnamese young consumers as a whole.

Key words: *cause-related marketing, brand-cause fit, young consumers, Vietnam*

Language: English

Grade:

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Although the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is arguably believed to have taken form in the early 1950s, history has shown that businesses have always demonstrated concerns for their society centuries prior to that period (Carroll, 2008). While there are various ways for companies to make a positive impact on the world, cause-related marketing (CRM) has proven to be a popular CSR strategy employed by marketing practitioners around the globe in the recent years (Guerreiro, Rita & Trigueiros, 2015). First emerged in 1983 when sales of a certain product or service are used to support a social cause or charity (Guerreiro, Rita & Trigueiros, 2015), CRM has brought about a significant transformation in the business world as philanthropic activities no longer mean giving away but also bring financial benefits to the firms.

The rapid growth of CRM can be attributed to the increasing demand for socially responsible companies (Hoek & Gendall, 2008). As the living standard increases, consumers are demanding more not only for themselves but also for the communities they live in. Thus, firms need to increase product quality and enhance CSR initiatives at the same time. In addition, engaging in CRM activities is also a method for firms to differentiate their products from those of their competitors, and thus the chance for an increase in revenues is also magnified (Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012).

Despite CRM's widespread appeal, there are still many contradicting views regarding the characteristics of an effective CRM campaign across various literature. On one hand, some researchers believe that only a logical connection between the brand and the sponsored cause can bring about positive returns (Hoek & Gendall, 2008). Such logical connection can be referred to as high brand-cause fit. On the other hand, a low brand-cause fit is generally considered to have a negative impact. Despite so, many other researchers have questioned the validity of this belief and argue that the degree of fit doesn't influence customers' decision at all.

Given that background, this study not only attempts to gain more sophisticated understanding of the above ambiguous situation through qualitative data but also hopes to unveil other factors that can affect customers' responses and mitigate the

perceived negative effect of a low-fit. Moreover, the thesis will narrow the scope to exclusively focus on young Vietnamese consumers. Since Vietnam is currently an emerging market that attracts many foreign investments, companies might find this study helpful in understanding how to best design CRM campaigns in Vietnam.

1.2 Research problem

Given the fundamental assumption that a high brand-cause fit would generate more returns, many companies tend to just follow this direction to be in a safe position. However, not every brand can find a cause that matches logically with its image and value; and this is also an issue that has rarely been discussed across literature. To help bridging such research gap, this thesis would attempt to cater to the needs of brands that have no high-fit alternatives by investigating whether a low brand-cause fit does indeed significantly decrease purchase intention and by providing useful recommendations to improve CRM campaigns in this case.

At the same time, this study, which targets young Vietnamese consumers, hopes to unveil some significant consumer behaviors frequently observed in the country. While CRM has been employed by quite many firms in Vietnam, studies that look into how customers respond to such marketing strategy are still limited. This shortage of information consequently fails to provide substantial data to help firms choose strategically effective cause to maximize their campaigns' appeal.

This situation means that deeper understanding on how brand-cause fit affects young Vietnamese consumers' responses to CRM is of paramount importance. Moreover, it's also essential for brands that can't find a high-fit cause to be aware of other factors that might make up for the low-fit cause, which is extremely important as Vietnamese people are likely to be skeptical about philanthropic activities. Those two problems are the main cores driving this thesis, of which the ultimate purpose is to help managers produce more round-off strategic plans for their CRM initiatives.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

To address the issues discussed above, this thesis attempts to gain more insights into the following questions:

- ❖ How do young Vietnamese consumers perceive the value of brand-cause fit?

This main question is the core of this thesis. It explores how consumers interpret brand-cause fit and how such perception affects purchase intention. In order to address this question in a more profound way, two sub-questions are proposed as follows:

- a) What is the influence of high (versus low) brand-cause fit on consumers' purchase intentions?

The objectives of this question are to compare the perceived value of high and low brand-cause fit and to gain insight into the significance of high (versus low) brand-cause fit in shaping consumers' purchase intentions.

- b) What are the different factors or contexts that can alter the way consumers evaluate brand-cause fit?

Through this question, this study will explore if and how other factors can affect the way consumers perceive brand-cause fit. The results can be useful in assisting brands in improving their CRM initiatives.

All of the above objectives can be fulfilled through a detailed literature review as well as focus group discussions in which participants are asked to give opinions about brand-cause fit.

1.4 Definitions

In order to avoid any misunderstanding and confusion, this section presents some frequently used terms in this thesis. These concepts will also be further discussed in the literature review.

- Cause-related marketing (CRM):

CRM is defined as a practice in which company donates to a social cause, using profits from sales of certain goods (Larson, Flaherty, Zablah, Brown & Wiener, 2007).

- Brand-cause fit:

Nan and Heo (2007: 65) described brand-cause fit as “the overall perceived relatedness of the brand and the cause with multiple cognitive bases.”

- Customer perceived value:

Zeithaml (1988:14) defined perceived value as “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.”

- Cognitive elaboration:

The process that is activated as consumers attempt to make sense of a brand-cause link, which can cause consumers to either accept or reject a brand-cause association (Trimble and Holmes, 2013).

- Purchase intention:

Purchase intention can be understood as “consumer’s choice and intentions to make product purchases and participate in the CRM campaign” (Hou, Du & Li, 2008).

1.5 Structure of the thesis

In order to answer the above research questions, a literature review will immediately follow this introduction chapter to explore current beliefs, arguments, and attitudes towards cause-related marketing, especially brand-cause fit. Then, the methodology chapter will explain how the data-collection process is conducted. Specific discoveries will then be presented in the findings chapter, and the discussion chapter consequently looks into how the findings support or contradict with what have been discussed in the literature review. Finally, the conclusion chapter will finalize this thesis by answering the stated research questions as well as giving suggestions for future research based on the study’s limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review, first and foremost, aims to provide an overview of existing knowledge on cause-related marketing as well as its benefits and values. Types of brand-cause fit and the level of fit (high versus low) would then be elaborated in detail. Next, purchase intention will be briefly discussed and a look at Vietnamese consumers is also included. Lastly, a conceptual framework connecting important concepts will conclude the literature review, guiding the next step for this thesis.

2.1 Cause-related marketing

2.1.1 Overview

It is believed that cause-related marketing (CRM) or cause marketing can be traced back to 1983 when American Express launched a marketing campaign with the Ellis Island Foundation to help restore the Statue of Liberty back to its old-day glory. For each credit card usage and each new credit card issued, the company would contribute one cent and one dollar respectively towards the renovation of the iconic landmark (Guerreiro, Rita & Trigueiros, 2015). The campaign generated \$1.7 million in total and brought about both economic and philanthropic benefits, allowing the company to give and receive at the same time. Drawing from various research, Hoek and Gendall (2008) have concluded that CRM is able to help a company differentiate itself in the market and strengthen reputation. Not only can it induce customers to have a positive impression towards the company, CRM can also encourage purchase intentions and raise substantial revenues.

For the past few decades, cause-related marketing has gained massive interest from various different firms striving for customers' attention. Nowadays, CRM is generally considered to be a type of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. While this practice has been employed for a long time, there are still variations in the definition of this term, each of which takes a different perspective. For example, CRM is defined as a practice in which company donates to a social cause, using profits from sales of certain goods (Larson, Flaherty, Zablah, Brown & Wiener, 2007). Another definition of CRM denotes that it's "a commercial activity by which businesses and charities or good causes form a partnership with each other to market an image, product or service for mutual benefit" (Adkins, 2003: 670). Here, cause-related marketing acts as a channel

for both business and good cause to achieve their own goals and objectives (Sana & Tarcza, 2015). As noted from the two definitions, the first one focuses on the donation and the philanthropic aspects of CRM. Meanwhile, the second one regards CRM as a rather common business partnership from which both parties gain certain benefits. Although both definitions capture the essence of CRM in a distinct way, the one that highlights the business partnership would lead to less confusion. After all, CRM is not a type of philanthropy because it mainly serves to maximize profits and improve brand's image. Definitions that focus on the philanthropic aspect have incited skepticism and misled many consumers to doubt firms as "exploiters of causes and charities" (Farache, Perks, Wanderley & Sousa, 2008). Therefore, a more neutral description of the concept of CRM should be emphasized in order to avoid such misunderstanding.

Cause-related marketing is becoming more popular, which can be explained by consumers' demand for companies being socially responsible (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). Moreover, companies might feel obliged to engage in altruistic activities because consumers' perception of a company's CSR practices can influence their attitudes towards that company's products (Du, Hou & Li, 2008). Regarding the relationship between CRM and customers, Adiwijaya and Fauzan (2012) further pointed out that every brand should create a symbolic value, which is altruism in this case, to allow customers to feel more relatable to the brand's value. When customers see a brand supporting a cause that they also deeply care about, they are likely to develop a long term relationship with that brand. Therefore, CRM is an opportunity to connect customers and brand on a more personal level.

2.1.2 Benefits of cause-related marketing

According to various literature, CRM serves these following main purposes: increasing firm performances (Nan & Heo, 2007), improving brand image as being socially responsible (Sana & Tarcza, 2015), facilitating social change (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012) and creating a competitive advantage (Hoek & Gendall, 2008).

CRM has been proven to be an effective method to help firm increase profits (Sana & Tarcza, 2015) by enhancing reputation, attracting socially responsible consumers and influencing purchase intentions (Lu, Wei & Li, 2015). Moreover, driven by emotional

factors induced by the social cause (Nair & Das, 2015), consumers might make irrational purchase decisions, which are consequently beneficial to the company. CRM can also satisfy shareholders' interest when sponsoring a social cause could bring about additional economic benefits (Sana & Tarcza, 2015). For example, a company that produces notebooks can support illiterate children, which might help them gain new customers.

Nan and Heo (2007) stated that CRM in general can evoke positive attitudes towards the brand, regardless of the cause type and the level of fit between the brand and its sponsored cause. Similarly, Sana and Tarcza (2015: 1236) described CRM as an effective "strategic tool" that can increase customers' participation and facilitate long term relations between brands and customers. Also, customers' satisfaction can be enhanced not only by using the products but also by the pleasure customers feel when they are able to contribute to the community (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). Additionally, through CRM practice, companies can build partnerships with other non-profit organizations in the community (Sana & Tarcza, 2015), which can improve brand image and bring about unexpected benefits in the long term. In case a company has conducted unethical behaviors, CRM has also been shown to be able to alter consumers' perceptions towards the company in a more positive way (Webb & Mohr, 1998).

CRM not only benefits the brand but also the social cause it's supporting, regardless of the degree of congruence between the two parties. Every company can participate in cause-related marketing even when they might not be able to find a cause that matches their brand's image or products. A safe strategic choice for companies is to choose causes that are prevalent, such as breast cancer (Trimble and Holmes, 2013). This point will be further discussed in the coming sections.

Just like other CSR initiatives, CRM is also believed to create a competitive advantage. Several experiments have proved that consumers use CSR to differentiate between different companies (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). If being leveraged in a strategic manner, CRM can deliver a superior value to customers, making a company standout from other entities that provide similar products and services (Munilla & Miles, 2005). The so-called superior value can refer to the humanitarian desires that consumers can achieve

when they do a good deed for their communities (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). Lafferty, Goldsmith and Hult (2004) further emphasized that such additional value customers obtain from their purchase can establish and strengthen trust between brands and customers.

2.1.3 Customer perceived value

Customer perceived value is a significant topic that marketing practitioners pay attention to. Therefore, it should be studied in the context of CRM as it might be an important factor that drives customers' purchase decision. Generally, Zeithaml (1988:14) defined perceived value as "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given," although each customer has their own subjective opinion about the two elements. For the things received, some might look for the high quality while some may want the utility; and for what is given, some might value the amount of money spent while others are concerned with the time and effort they spend (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, customer perceived value can also be understood as "a trade-off between relative quality and relative price" (Chen & Dubinsky, 2003: 326).

There are many ways to look at the dimensions of perceived value, of which the five dimensions proposed by Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) is a notable example that has served as the foundation for many subsequent studies:

- Functional value: the functional or utilitarian aspect of a product. This can also be referred to as product-related value (Aulia, Sukati & Sulaiman, 2016) and practical value (de Ruyter, Wetzels, Lemmink & Mattsson, 1997).
- Conditional value: the perceived utility in a specific situation.
- Social value: customers' sense of belonging to a specific social group while using the product. Aulia, Sukati and Sulaiman (2016) further extended social value to include customers' need for compliment during product consumption.
- Emotional value: the emotions or feelings aroused from product consumption.
- Epistemic value: the aroused curiosity for knowledge when using a product.

In the context of this thesis, functional value and emotional value will be taken into account to examine customers' behavior in cause-related marketing. When purchasing a product linked with a cause, customers receive the usual functional value that they

would have otherwise also gotten from any other similar product. In addition to that, customers acquire emotional value through the satisfied feelings of doing a good deed for society (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). Other than that, social value can also be studied in the context of CRM. Nan and Heo (2007: 66) have mentioned that “perceived altruism of the brand can result in a sense of connectedness or social identification, which is the inference that the sponsoring brand or company has certain desirable traits that resonate with one’s sense of self.” This indicates that as customers take part in CRM, they feel connected to a community whose members also care about a cause that bears much meaning to themselves.

2.2 Brand-cause fit

2.2.1 Definition

There are many aspects of CRM that are worth exploring, of which fit is a popular topic that has received much attention (Sana & Tarcza, 2015). Brand-cause fit is considered an important antecedent to and predictor of effective CRM campaigns (Trimble & Holmes, 2013). Several other terms have also been frequently used to address the issue, such as compatibility, relevance, match, congruence, etc. Yet, despite its popularity, it’s difficult to say if there has been a concrete understanding of the essence of fit (Nan & Heo, 2007).

Nan and Heo (2007: 65, 66) described brand-cause fit as “the overall perceived relatedness of the brand and the cause with multiple cognitive bases.” In general, brand-cause fit can be attributed to whether a brand and its sponsored cause have equivalent consumer base and value (Nan & Heo, 2007). It can also be understood as “the degree of acceptance of the pairing of the brand and the cause, from the consumers’ point-of-view” (Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012: 358).

There are two types of brand-cause fit as addressed by Gwinner (1997) and other literature:

- Functional fit: determined by the compatibility between functions of the product and the social cause sponsored
- Image fit: determined by the compatibility between image of the brand and the social cause sponsored

While both types of fit have a certain influence on consumers' perception, each executes its effect with a distinct mechanism. Since functional fit is easier to notice, it has a more direct influence on consumers' perceptions of CRM. Meanwhile, image fit affects perception in an indirect and subtle manner as customers have to observe brand's motivation and credibility in order to make a comparison (Bigné, Currás-Pérez & Aldás-Manzano, 2012).

2.2.2 Criticism towards brand-cause fit

As stated before, consumers analyze brand-cause fit through cognitive bases before accepting or rejecting the brand-cause link. However, there are researchers who disagree with such common belief. Nan and Heo (2007) claimed that any association with a good cause would benefit the company regardless of the level of fit. Hamlin and Wilson (2004) even stressed that brand-cause fit has no effect on consumers' perceptions and purchase intention, claiming that consumers barely engage in a detailed rationalization to evaluate the brand and its sponsored cause.

On the other hand, Nan and Heo (2007) added that the effect of brand-cause fit is only applicable to a certain group of consumers. They identified brand consciousness as an important individual characteristic that influences how consumers perceive brand-cause fit and CRM. Their experiment revealed that customers with high brand consciousness are more likely to be affected by brand-cause fit, responding more positively to a high fit and negatively to a lower fit. Meanwhile, those who are low in brand consciousness barely analyze the compatibility level and thus their brand perceptions aren't influenced by it.

At the same time, there are researchers who disregard the importance of brand-cause fit, stating that the topic is overrated. Trimble and Holmes (2013) suggested that it's more important for a cause-brand alliance (CBA) to be accepted on face value than to be considered well-fit. Alliances accepted on face value usually involve causes that are widespread, popular and urgent. Here, customers' familiarity with a cause is believed to limit scrutiny and elicit more positive response even when there seems to

be little congruence between the brand and the cause (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). This view would be further discussed later in this literature review.

2.2.3 High brand-cause fit

While each person has a different interpretation of brand-cause fit, ideally a high fit implies a highly logical link between a brand and its sponsored cause in terms of product functions or brand image. The general consensus is that high brand-cause fit generates more positive responses from customers.

Trimble and Holmes (2013) used persuasion knowledge model and persuasion theory by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) to understand how consumers interpret CRM and how their perceptions are affected by the degree of brand-cause fit. The core concept is cognitive elaboration, which is activated when consumers attempt to make sense of a brand-cause link. The persuasion theory claims that such cognitive elaborations can either cause customers to accept or reject a brand-cause association. The more elaborations consumers involve in, the more judgements they make and the more likely they are going to reject a brand-cause link. On the contrary, if a CRM link doesn't activate cognitive elaboration, consumers would make fewer judgements and be more likely to accept the link.

With such foundation, Trimble and Holmes (2013) then implied that a brand-cause alliance that doesn't lead to cognitive elaborations would generate more positive responses from customers; and past research has pointed out that a congruent brand-cause alliance would create such effect. A high brand-cause fit, which demonstrates a strong parallel between the company and the sponsored cause, would result in fewer cognitive elaborations and lead to less rejection.

Various research also agrees that a high brand-cause fit is more appreciated. Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) stated that a high fit indicates a higher competency to help the sponsored cause because the company would possess the suitable expertise, skills, products and technologies. Moreover, a high fit also indicates that the company is able to effectively manage its CRM initiatives (Bigné, Chumpitaz & Currás, 2010), shows a clearer picture of the company's positioning (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006) and facilitates brand recall (Cornwell & Coote, 2005).

2.2.4 Low brand-cause fit

On the contrary, a low fit is expected to bring about the opposite results from that of a high fit. Lack of congruence between brand and cause increases judgements, leaving the consumers having doubt about the corporate's motives and credibility (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). Such skepticism makes consumers believe that the company has no concrete plan and capability to support the cause. Chéron, Kohlbacher and Kusuma (2012: 358) even said that sponsoring a low-fit cause is an "abusive marketing tool," which is a rather unpleasant term to address the issue.

However, in real life, not every company supporting a low-fit cause fails on the market. At the same time, researchers often don't emphasize that it is indeed quite a challenging task to find a cause that matches perfectly with a company; for example, it would be quite hard for a tobacco company to find a highly fit social cause. However, some research has shown that there are ways to lessen the negative effects of a low fit.

First, familiarity with a social cause can induce customers to respond positively to a social cause. Some causes are so prevalent (e.g.: cancer, fighting illiteracy...) that they appeal to a wide range of customers. Trimble and Rifon (2006: 30) stated that such causes can "provide a simple image transference from the popular cause to the sponsor" even when the brand-cause fit is minimal. Overall, choosing this type of cause is a safe alternative for companies whose values and products share little similarity with any good cause (Nan & Heo, 2007). This is because popular causes are usually widespread and urgent, and thus they are able to trigger strong emotional responses from customers and make the low fit seem rather insignificant.

Secondly, repetition is also an effective alternative for companies sponsoring a low-fit cause. Dardis (2009) claimed that repeated corporate communication and a clear message explaining the company's choice of cause can facilitate customers to avoid making judgements about a low fit. As repeated exposure can develop a positive affection for a brand-cause link (Trimble & Holmes, 2013), brands should consider planning a well-written message about their CRM campaign to shape customers' perception. Furthermore, repeated exposure to a certain brand-cause alliance may "facilitate recognition, maintain brand salience and reinforce brand choice" (Hoek &

Gendall, 2008: 288). In a sense, this position aligns with the notion that customers don't participate in a complicated cognitive process when interpreting CRM and can be influenced by other factors, a point made by Hamlin and Wilson (2004).

Lastly, companies can let customers select the cause to encourage positive reactions towards the CRM campaign. As customers are given a chance to choose a cause from a list of low-fit causes, they experience an increase in their perceived role because they can directly participate in the campaign and contribute to the cause they support. This alternative is however more effective when consumers get to choose from a list of low-fit causes than from a list of high-fit causes. This can also be explained by customers' perceived role. A firm that can find high-fit causes is perceived as being effective in managing its CRM initiative, and thus customers don't feel that they play a very significant role in this campaign. On the other hand, low-fit choices, which imply that the company is struggling in its campaign, are much more preferred as they enhance perceived personal role of customers (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012).

2.3 Purchase intention in CRM

Purchase intention can be understood as "consumer's choice and intentions to make product purchases and participate in the CRM campaign" (Hou, Du & Li, 2008). Research has shown that there are many factors that can affect purchase intention, such as brand name, product quality, price, packaging.... (Mirabi, Akbariyeh & Tahmasebifard, 2015). Thus, a positive response towards brand-cause fit alone doesn't necessarily lead to actual purchase decision, which makes it important to explore this concept in the context of cause-related marketing.

A major concern for various companies engaging in CRM is whether customers' skepticism about the firms' motives would affect their purchase intention, which is the antecedent of profit making. However, research shows that this is no longer a major problem for managers, especially those who are still in doubt about integrating CRM in their marketing effort. Customers are now familiar with the idea that there's always a financial motive behind every marketing campaign; and they accept that companies sponsor a social cause mostly to increase profit while helping society at the same time

(Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). Thus, customers' purchase intention wouldn't be affected by companies' rationale for sponsoring a social cause.

The consensus across various literature is that a high brand-cause fit will generate more favorable attitude towards the brands and subsequently increase customers' purchase intention (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). On the other hand, a low fit would trigger cognitive elaborations (Trimble & Rifon, 2006) and make customers feel reluctant to purchase the products (Zdravkovic, Magnusson & Standley, 2010). However, as mentioned before, allowing customers to choose a cause for the company to sponsor would improve customers' attitude towards the brand-cause link. And this position can also be applied when it comes to purchase intention (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). When customers choose a cause that they care about, they are more likely to purchase the associated products to actually help that cause.

Besides the fit alone, there are other factors that can affect customers' purchase intention in CRM. These factors should be studied alongside the fit in order to better understand the strength of brand-cause fit's impact on purchase intention. A high brand-cause fit, though can generate positive response, might not be strong enough to convince consumers to purchase. Du, Hou and Li (2008) have pointed out that customers are more likely to purchase from a brand that supports a local cause rather than a national cause because it directly influences their community. This can also be referred to as cause proximity. The phenomenon can be explained by an individual's tendency to maximize their own self-interest, which suggests that customers are more willing to help a cause that has a direct impact on their lives. Another factor that can affect purchase intention is consumer-company congruence (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). As mentioned before, customers gain social value from participating in CRM when they feel connected to a group that bears certain similarities to their own traits. Such connection between brand and consumers can also encourage purchase intention (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). Even so, this is a factor that companies can't control because no brand can establish an image that is embraced by everyone. Still, consumer-company congruence is still a significant factor that should be taken in account.

Overall, brand-cause fit's impact on customers' attitude doesn't necessarily confirm that it also has the same effect on purchase intention. While fit is an antecedent of purchase intention, it doesn't play a key role in this process and its effect is greatly moderated by many other factors. This finding suggests that brand-cause fit shouldn't be examined separately in the context of cause-related marketing.

2.4 Vietnamese consumers

As of today, little effort has been made to understand Vietnamese consumers' behavior in general and in the context of cause-related marketing. Thus, common cultural knowledge would be applied to better understand Vietnamese consumers.

Vietnam has developed significantly since the 20th century when the country eliminated the ineffective centrally planned economy to a more profitable market economy during the 1990s. Thanks to modernization and industrialization, the living standard of Vietnamese citizens has risen substantially, especially in big cities (Cho, Ching & Luong, 2014). This means that more and more Vietnamese consumers now have the luxury to purchase products that aren't merely meant to serve their basic needs. Such products include those that are used in CRM because they also carry emotional value.

This paper's aim is to explore attitudes towards CRM among young Vietnamese consumers, who carry certain traits that might affect their perceptions of CRM. Consumers younger than 30 represent half of the population, and they're characterized as a demanding consumer force (Nielsen, 2013). Moreover, young Vietnamese consumers are generally well-educated and, to an extent, are aware of the disturbing social problems in the modern world. Thus, they can be willing to participate in CRM.

One behavior of Vietnamese consumers that is worth considering is impulsive buying, especially in shopping environments like supermarket. Impulsive buying, which is the spontaneous action of purchasing a product without any previous plan (Nair & Das, 2015), is a prevalent phenomenon in Vietnam (Cho, Ching & Luong, 2014). Emotions play a great role in inducing such spontaneous decision (Nair & Das, 2015) and they are also a big concept in CRM.

A research on the effect of different cause's attributes on consumers' purchase intention in China shows that brand-cause fit does influence consumers' behavior (Hou, Du & Li, 2008). While such result can't necessarily be applied to Vietnamese consumers, it's also worthy to keep in mind such information, given the similarities between Vietnam and China.

2.5 Conceptual framework

The following framework connects the key concepts that have been elaborated in the literature review. It aims to provide a big picture of how brand-cause fit affects consumers' response, which includes attitude and purchase intention.

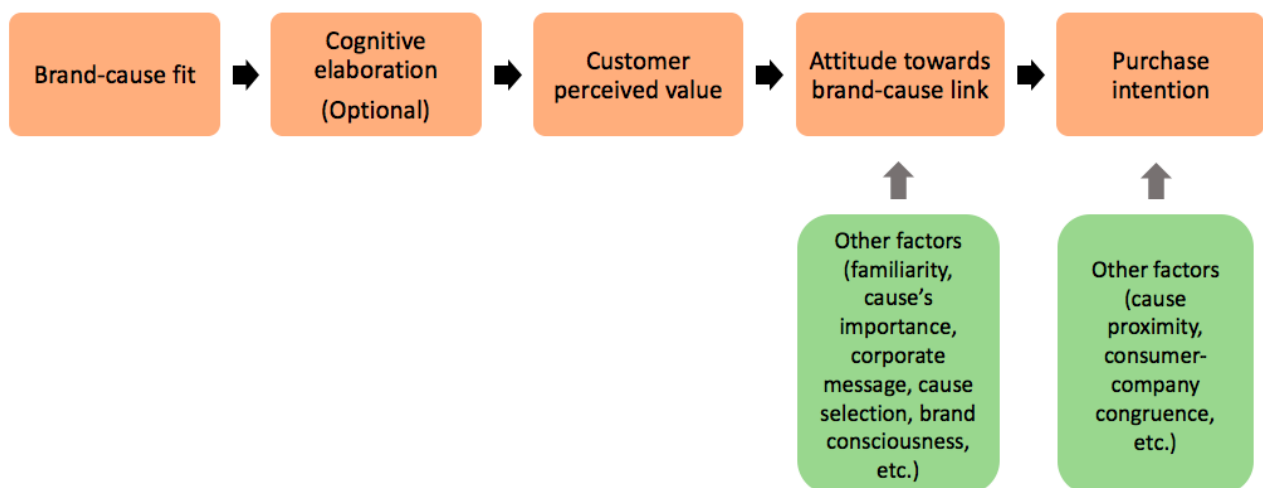


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

When encountering CRM, consumers may or may not engage in a detailed cognitive elaboration process to make sense of the brand-cause link and measure its fit. The theory is that a high fit would lead to less elaboration while a low fit would trigger this process, causing customers to doubt and eventually reject the brand-cause link (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). While cognitive elaboration is believed to be an essential part of understanding brand-cause fit (Nan & Heo, 2007), some customers form their attitude based on other factors. These factors are also believed to reduce the dubiety of a low-fit, causing consumers to respond positively to a brand-cause link even when there's no obvious congruence. After customers have established an attitude towards the brand-cause link, they still have to consider other factors such as cause proximity, consumer-company congruence, etc. to determine whether to purchase the product or

not. This framework suggests that brand-cause fit does affect consumers' responses to cause-related marketing, although the weight of its influence is moderated by various other factors. With this foundation, this thesis would first aim to understand how brand-cause fit (high versus low) influences customers' purchase decisions. Then, other moderating factors would be studied to see how they can alter customers' perception towards the fit. Consequently, the findings generated from this study would be helpful in assisting managers to find a suitable cause and strategy for their cause-related marketing initiatives.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter will focus on explaining the process of using focus group to collect qualitative data and why such method benefits this thesis. A summary and analysis of participants' profiles is also given to help understand how the nature of this sample can affect the results.

3.1 Research method and design

Since consumers' attitude can't be easily measured and quantified, this thesis will collect qualitative data to gain insights into the impact of brand-cause fit. As stated in the research objectives, the main aim is not only to confirm whether brand-cause fit influences customers' purchase intention but also to explore the extent and the mechanism of such influence. Another main goal is to investigate other important factors besides fit that firms can take advantage of to better manage their CRM efforts. These objectives are rather hard to achieve with quantitative data as a normal survey tends to set a limit to what participants can say (Morgan, 1996). On the other hand, qualitative data collection methods allow participants to elaborate on their opinions and give constructive advice, which overall can facilitate a more thorough exploration into a topic.

Of all qualitative data collection methods, focus group has been chosen for this thesis due to many of its advantages. Firstly, focus group facilitates group discussion and interaction. Focus group itself is distinct from combining separate individual interviews in the sense that "the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other" (Morgan, 1996: 139). Thus, the results will be more substantial and in-depth. Secondly, focus group can help generate more data about a topic. While it's difficult for one person to address all the different aspects of brand-cause fit in an individual interview, listening to others' opinions in a focus group can trigger one to reflect and to come up with new ideas. Thirdly, the moderator (also the writer of this thesis) can play a significant role in the group interaction, which is necessary in case participants misunderstand the concept of cause-related marketing. Hence, the moderator can make sure that the discussion stays on track so that useful and appropriate data can be collected. Lastly, focus group is quite flexible as the moderator can develop the conversation based on what the participants have contributed. This

enables the discovery of unexpected information and ideas (Cooper & Schindler, 2014).

Despite all the advantages of focus group, this qualitative data collection method is still one “with limited sampling accuracy” (Cooper & Schindler, 2014: 162). Indeed, this study collects data from only a very small sample, of which participants do not possess many different characteristics to represent the diverse nature of Vietnamese young consumers. Thus, results gained from this study should not be considered equivalent to that of a quantitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2014).

3.2 Sample selection

This study examines how young Vietnamese consumers respond to cause-related marketing, thus the participants have to satisfy the two following criteria: firstly, they must be Vietnamese millennials, born and raised in Vietnam; and secondly, they must have no or little knowledge about cause-related marketing in general. Due to the limited number of people in Mikkeli who can meet these two requirements, the participants were chosen selectively and were individually invited to take part. There were 12 participants in total, 11 of whom are students from Aalto University and only one is from Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences. The age range is from 19 to 23, and the average age is 20.33 years old. The participants were divided into two groups based on their time preference. The first group consisted of five participants and the female: male ratio was 2:3. The second one consisted of seven participants and the female: male ratio was 4:3. Combining both groups, there was an equal distribution of gender with six females and six males.

The majority of the participants (7 participants) come from Ha Noi, the capital city located in North Vietnam. Meanwhile, the rest come from the South: three from Ho Chi Minh city - the most populous metropolitan area and the economic hub of the country, one from Da Lat and one from Bien Hoa, both of which are smaller cities. It is believed that people from each region of Vietnam have different mindsets and lifestyles, thus it's necessary to make sure that the geographical diversity is present in this sample. On the other hand, since all of the participants are university students, they don't have any source of income and thus rely on parents for financial support.

At the same time, there are many characteristics of this group of participants that might affect the outcome of the discussion. Firstly, everyone in each group either knows each other or studies in the same class before. This creates an informal and friendly environment for participants to freely express themselves and even to rebut others' opinions. Secondly, 11 out of 12 participants are business students, thus their way of thinking would bear certain dissimilarities from that of an average Vietnamese consumer. However, their business-oriented mindsets can be helpful in generating substantial ideas to fulfill the ultimate objectives of this research, which are to examine the effect of brand-cause fit and to help marketing practitioners manage their CRM initiatives better. Lastly, since all participants are currently studying in Finland, their Western-influenced perspectives might lead to results that are different from those of a focus group conducted in Vietnam with local young people instead.

Group	Participant	Age	Gender	Hometown	Major of study
1	Participant 1	21	Male	Bien Hoa	International Business
	Participant 2	20	Male	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 3	19	Female	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 4	19	Female	Ha Noi	Environmental Engineering
	Participant 5	21	Male	Da Lat	International Business
2	Participant 6	19	Female	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 7	23	Female	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 8	19	Male	Ho Chi Minh	International Business
	Participant 9	22	Female	Ho Chi Minh	International Business
	Participant 10	19	Male	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 11	20	Female	Ha Noi	International Business
	Participant 12	22	Male	Ho Chi Minh	International Business

Table 1 Participants' profiles

3.3 Data collection

To ensure the objectivity of the discussion, the topic wasn't revealed to the participants beforehand. This can prevent participants from intentionally learning about the topic, which can alter their original opinions. Also, the participants were informed that the discussion would be taped to make sure no valuable idea is missed.

Before the focus group session started, the participants were given approximately 10 minutes to get comfortable. The moderator then initiated the discussion by first stating the aim of the focus group (without mentioning brand-cause fit) and announced a few ground rules to ensure the flow of the conversation. The official script can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this thesis. To make sure that all the discussion questions can generate meaningful results and don't cause much confusion, the moderator had conducted a simple pre-test with a group of two. The focus group was divided into two main parts: a choice-selection activity and a discussion. The first activity asked participants to choose from a list of brand-cause links as demonstrated in the following table. Apart from the ones by Toms shoes, the other four options are fictional CRM campaigns. The participants were given a few minutes to decide on one option they're most likely to purchase in real life without being informed about the degree of fit of each option.

High brand-cause fit	Low brand-cause fit
<p>Toms shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, one pair will be donated to a child in need in Africa.</p>	<p>Toms shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, a week's supply of clean water will be provided to a person in need around the world. Water scarcity is a global issue as more than 1.1 billion people are affected each year (Blueplanetnetwork.org, 2017).</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Adidas shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, 1€ will be donated to help open a sports training center for impoverished children in Africa who dream of becoming professional athletes.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Adidas shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, 1€ will be used to support more than 20,000 street children in Vietnam (Gvnet.com, 2017).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Nike shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, 10% of its profit will be donated to the “Challenged Athletes Foundation” - an organization that helps people with physical disabilities to overcome their challenges and have more active lifestyles.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Nike shoes</p> <p>For each pair of shoes sold, 10% of its profit will be donated to the American Breast Cancer Foundation. Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women, and it is expected that 255,180 new cases will arise this year in the US (Breastcancer.org, 2017).</p>

Table 2 Brand-cause links for choice-selection activity

There are many reasons why the above shoes brands were chosen as the representative examples throughout this discussion. Firstly, shoes are familiar items that everyone possesses, and they also have a special appeal to youngsters, including those who play sports professionally or those who just follow fashion trends. Thus, the participants would feel more related to the subject; and as they feel they might have substantial or meaningful information to share, they're more likely to feel engaged in the discussion. Secondly, the three brands featured (Nike, Adidas, Toms) are of different levels of popularity. While Nike and Adidas shoes are quite famous among Vietnamese young consumers, Toms shoes is still a strange name in the Vietnamese market. This factor might lead to very interesting results to help foreign brands that aim to enter Vietnamese market by conducting a CRM campaign.

Of the six causes presented in the table, three involve a high-fit cause and three other involve a low-fit cause (water scarcity, street children, American Breast Cancer Foundation). While the low-fit ones seem detached from the shoes business, they all possess different factors that can alter customers' perception of the brand-cause link, as discussed in the literature review. For example, water scarcity is a global issue that bears utmost importance to human lives. Meanwhile, supporting Vietnamese street children can possess cause-proximity advantage as it directly affects the participants' home country. Moreover, each of these causes might have a special meaning or connection to a participant. Therefore, these different causes can help explore various factors that, together with brand-cause fit, influence consumers' purchase intention.

To make sure that the result of the choice-selection activity can reflect the impact of brand-cause fit most objectively, the participants were informed that all of the three brands have the type of shoes they're looking for at the same price and quality. Although it's difficult to eliminate bias caused by participants' past experience with a specific brand, this might also lead to some insights into the influence of brand preference.

The choice-selection activity is immediately followed by a discussion session. Apart from explaining the rationales behind their brand-cause link selection, participants will also be asked about other factors or contexts relating to the options, some of which have been elaborated in the literature review. While there's a set of 12 guiding questions that outline the discussion (see Appendix 1), these questions aren't fixed and the discussion will mostly have a semi-structured form. Thus, the moderator will start with some specific questions and then develop the discussion based on what the participants have contributed.

3.4 Content analysis

The content analysis process will follow the usual procedure of a regular qualitative research. The two tapes, each lasted approximately one hour, were first transcribed word-for-word into a Word document immediately after the sessions ended. From the 16-page transcription combining both focus groups, the main topics were categorized in an Excel file based on the discussion questions. Specific findings will be presented in the next chapter.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter describes the significant findings drawn from the focus group discussions. It first reveals the results of the choice-selection activity and summarizes the rationales behind participants' decisions. Then, this section would also present participants' opinions regarding how high and low brand-cause fit affect their perceptions and purchase intentions.

4.1 Choice-selection activity

The choice-selection activity aims to take a glimpse of the participants' purchase intention in the context of cause-related marketing. The results are presented in the table below:

Participant	Choice	Level of fit
Participant 2, 4, 8, 9	Toms shoes - For each pair of shoes sold, a week's supply of clean water will be provided to a person in need around the world. Water scarcity is a global issue as more than 1.1 billion people are affected each year (Blueplanetnetwork.org, 2017).	Low
Participant 3, 7, 12	Adidas shoes - For each pair of shoes sold, 1€ will be used to support more than 20,000 street children in Vietnam (Gvnet.com, 2017).	Low
Participant 1, 6, 10	Nike shoes - For each pair of shoes sold, 10% of its profit will be donated to the "Challenged Athletes Foundation" - an organization that helps people with physical disabilities to overcome their challenges and have more active lifestyles.	High
Participant 11	Nike shoes - For each pair of shoes sold, 10% of its profit will be donated to the American Breast Cancer Foundation. Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women, and it is expected that 255,180 new cases will arise this year in the US (Breastcancer.org, 2017).	Low

Participant 5	Adidas shoes - For each pair of shoes sold, 1€ will be donated to help open a sports training center for impoverished children in Africa who dream of becoming professional athletes.	High
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Table 3 Choice-selection result

High brand-cause fit	Low brand-cause fit
4 votes	8 votes

Table 4 High versus low brand-cause fit

While previous experience with a brand can affect participants' choices, results do show that the cause itself also has a significant impact as Toms – water scarcity was the most chosen brand-cause link (4 times) although Toms is almost unknown in the Vietnamese market. Furthermore, as observed from the table above, 8 out of 12 (66.67%) participants chose a low-fit cause while only four chose a high-fit cause. Although the result can't prove that a low fit is more preferred, it can suggest that a low fit might not have a negative influence after all.

4.2 Purchase intention explanations

After the choice-selection activity, the participants were asked to determine some major factors that have affected their decisions. To obtain the most objective results, the moderator still, up to this point, hadn't mentioned brand-cause fit as the main topic of the focus group. The mentioned factors are presented in the table below:

Type	Factor	Mentioned by participants
Influenced by internal determinants	Cause's importance /urgency	Participant 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 (8 times)
	Feeling related/ emotionally connected to the social cause	Participant 1, 3, 4, 11, 12 (5 times)
Influenced by external determinants	Brand preference	Participant 1, 6, 7, 9, 10 (5 times)
	Amount of donation	Participant 3, 4, 6 (3 times)
	The magnitude of impact	Participant 2, 9 (2 times)
	Brand-cause fit	Participant 5, 6 (2 times)

Table 5 Factors influencing purchase intention

From the table above, it can be seen that the six factors can be divided into two main categories: those that are affected by internal determinants and those that are affected by external determinants. Internal determinants are personal beliefs, values, perceptions and experiences while external ones are related to the brand and CRM campaign design.

4.2.1 Factors influenced by internal determinants

Of all the factors affecting purchase intention, cause's importance/urgency is the most frequently mentioned variable. Participant 2 chose to support the water scarcity issue because he believed that people who lack access to clean water are likely to be in a more destitute situation than those who have breast cancer or other problems. Other participants who also chose this option added that water scarcity is a global issue and "a matter of life and death" (Participant 8, 9). Not just that, water scarcity can lead to many other detrimental illnesses that would cause much worse results than lack of shoes (Participant 9). Meanwhile, those who supported street children in Vietnam believed that caring for children is essential in order to "make the world better" (Participant 7, 12), and those who supported the "Challenged Athletes Foundation" stated that it's necessary to support the ones who weren't born the same as others (Participant 6, 10). Overall, everyone has their subjective idea of what the most important or urgent social cause is, and thus their decisions are affected by their own perceptions of the world.

On the other hand, 5 participants said that they were feeling related or emotionally connected to a particular social cause. Participant 1 felt an urge to support the "Challenged Athletes Foundation" because he's an athlete himself and he knows "what kinds of joy and personal pride there are in overcoming personal limit in playing sports." Thus, he believed that disabled people can feel much more confident as they can prove themselves through sports. Participant 3 shared that because she just recently watched a movie that featured street children, she felt more "sympathized with this cause" than with other causes. Participant 12 also chose the same social cause because he personally cares about helping children in general. Meanwhile, participant 4 said that because she's studying environmental engineering, she felt the urge to support anything related to the environment, which is water scarcity in this case. As for participant 11, she shared that her mom is a doctor, thus she has a "special awareness

about the price for the treatment of breast cancer” and the disease itself in general, which encouraged her to support such cause. Through these opinions, it is suggested that all participants have distinct backgrounds and experiences that trigger them to develop special feelings towards different causes.

4.2.2 Factors influenced by external determinants

Brand preference has a powerful influence on customers’ purchase intention although not everyone has a favorite brand. For the five participants who did have a brand preference, the brand affected their decision by 60% (Participant 7, 9), 70% (Participant 1, 10), and 90% (Participant 6). All of these participants have had positive experience with their favorite brand in terms of product’s quality and design. Participant 6 said that a pair of shoes is still considered “an investment”, thus she would rather “put trust” in the brand of which quality has been personally testified. Participant 1 said that he’s been “buying Nike shoes since he was a kid”, thus he’s going to continue being a loyal customer even when the company is involved in a CSR scandal. For those who didn’t have a brand preference, they said that the brand name doesn’t have much effect. Despite so, they’re still likely to go with a brand that they know has a high standard in the production process.

Amount of donation, which was mentioned by 3 participants, was a rather interesting factor that triggered a lot of arguments. Participant 3 preferred the one-euro donation to the 10% of profits because she felt that 10% is just a small amount. When other participants argued that sometimes profits from selling a pair of shoes can be very high and 10% of that is worth a lot more than one euro, participant 3 said that “If they have that intention to give away, why don’t they give 50%?” On the contrary, participant 4 and 6 believed that one euro is too little and “can’t make a lot of difference”, so they eliminated the options that featured the one-euro donation while making their decisions.

The magnitude of impact refers to the ability of the charity campaign to help as many people as possible. Participant 2 and 9, both of whom chose to help people who lack access to clean water, reasoned that they did so because the campaign stated that it would help people around the world, not just in a specific area like Africa or Vietnam.

Thus, their donations can have a larger impact and consequently contribute more to society as a whole.

Brand-cause fit is the least mentioned factor. Of the two participants who did consider the connection between the brand and the cause, participant 5 had a rather strong opinion about the fit while participant 6 simply said that “shoes and athletes have something to do with each other so I think Nike will find some concrete ways to help the challenged athletes.” Meanwhile, participant 5 also criticized the low brand-cause fit, saying that those causes “don’t have anything to do with the company’s capability.” He expressed the conviction that shoes companies should only endorse sports-related social causes. Despite so, all participants further unanimously believed that Vietnamese consumers in general wouldn’t put much emphasis on brand-cause fit as price matters more to them.

These insights from the participants imply that brand preference, or at least brand’s reputation to produce high-quality products, is of paramount importance when it comes to actual purchase decision. Other than that, it is suggested that details regarding CRM campaign design such as amount of donation, magnitude of impact, and brand-cause fit can also have a significant impact on consumers’ perception. Thus, brands are recommended to simultaneously invest in product quality to make a long-term impact and focus on designing a campaign that can appeal to the majority of consumers.

4.2.3 Miscellaneous factors

While the following factors weren’t mentioned by any of the participants, they were discussed briefly in the literature review. Thus, the moderator decided to further explore these factors by mentioning them in the discussions.

Customer perceived value is an important quality that the participants considered carefully. Everybody said that quality (functional value) is the utmost important criterion (they didn’t mention this factor as the moderator had specified that all the shoes were of the same quality). When asked about emotional value, which can be the proud sensation of wearing shoes from a famous brand, the participants demonstrated mixed feelings. Some shared that they do feel “a little happy at first after purchasing the products”, but that feeling doesn’t last long as people don’t really concern about what

others put on (Participant 6, 7, 8, 10). Lastly, the participants gave no comments about social value of a product.

The literature review said that cause proximity can increase purchase intention. With such information, companies can expect young Vietnamese consumers to purchase products linked to a social cause in their home country. Surprisingly, some participants expressed reluctance to support a social cause in Vietnam (Participant 1, 5, 9, 10). This is mostly due to the corruption issue that is ubiquitous in Vietnam, which would prevent the money from “getting into the hands of the right people.” However, participant 5 and 12 said that “something is still better than nothing at all” so they believed that supporting your home country should still be encouraged. However, companies need to find solutions to make sure the donations reach the ones in need.

4.3 The effect of brand-cause fit on consumers’ perception and purchase intention

The choice-selection activity showed that only two out of twelve participants identified brand-cause fit as a factor that has influenced their decisions. However, when the moderator asked all 12 participants whether they thought about the connection between the brand and the cause initially, all admitted to have noticed some relevant as well as irrelevant brand-cause links. However, only two (Participant 5, 6) took brand-cause fit into account during their decision making process. Yet, only participant 5 elaborated on the fit carefully while participant 6 simply evaluated the fit for a few seconds and consequently didn’t consider it an important criterion. The ten remaining participants didn’t concern much about or elaborate on brand-cause fit. Given that information, the following sections will provide more in-depth exploration into participants’ opinions regarding both high and low brand-cause fit.

4.3.1 High brand-cause fit

Of all 12 participants, only two (Participant 1, 5) expressed favor towards a high fit. Participant 1 said that “for sports company, they should focus on what they do best, supporting sportsmen, athletes, and people who like to play sports instead of something like water project.” Similarly, participant 5 said that “when I think about the logical connection between the brand image and these social causes, I’d think whether

the sports brand has the capability to actually support that cause rather than whether they can advertise it effectively with their social cause.” This shows that these participants care more about the practicality of the project and whether they can make an actual impact by their purchase. Participant 5 also implied that he valued a high fit because it reflects the feasibility of the project, not the effectiveness of the marketing campaign itself.

The remaining 10 participants showed a neutral opinion towards a high fit, stating that it doesn’t matter to them whether there is a logical connection between the sports brand and its sponsored cause or not. Furthermore, they believed that a high-fit cause isn’t necessarily a good cause. Participant 6 said that although donating shoes in Africa seemed like a relevant cause, she thought that “there are many more urgent issues than that.” While these participants agree that engaging in CRM activities improves their impressions towards the brand, a high fit doesn’t necessarily increase that positive feelings.

While there are two participants who have addressed a preference for a high brand-cause fit, only one of them said that such high fit had increased his purchase intention (Participant 5). Meanwhile, participant 1, who also preferred a high fit, admitted that he tends to put more emphasis on brand name. For the 10 participants who had a neutral response, they also agree that the fit doesn’t make a lot of impact on their purchase intention. Participant 6 said that although she did think about the fit initially, that thoughts only lasted for a few seconds and thus didn’t have a noticeable effect.

Attitude towards high brand-cause fit	Number of participants
Positive	2 (Participant 1, 5)
Negative	0
Neutral	10

Table 6 Responses to high brand-cause fit

4.3.2 Low brand-cause fit

Both participant 1 and 5, who favored a high fit, had a negative impression towards a low brand-cause fit. Participant 1 said that although a company can still support a low-fit cause through various channels, that is still a very vague idea. Both participants supposed that the company would have to outsource to a different entity to carry out the donation process, thus they don't think the program would be as effective as when the companies take charge of things themselves.

Out of 10 participants who had a neutral opinion towards a high fit, eight remained neutral towards a low fit although they do notice that the brand and its sponsored cause don't seem very relevant. Interestingly, participant 6 said that because Nike has a specific line for women and girls, she thought that supporting breast cancer patients also makes sense as it can appeal to female customers.

When participants express neutrality towards a low fit, their perceptions are based on the importance of the cause instead. For example, participant 3 said that a low fit doesn't disturb her as she would just donate to those who need help the most. For example, she supported street children as she believed that even disabled people in the "Challenged Athletes Foundation" are having a much better life than children living on the streets who don't even have proper food to feed on. Participant 6 and 8 also shared the same opinion, stating that it's more sensible to donate to an urgent cause rather than a relevant but less important cause. Participant 4 said that "when you do a charity, you can donate to whatever you want and whoever in need." Thus, she asserted that a sports brand can donate to any social cause, and doing such thing proves that the brand cares not only about sports-related issues but also about other things in the world.

Participant 8 and 9, who chose to support water scarcity (a low-fit cause), at first didn't consider fit a significant factor that is worth considering. However, as the discussion went on, they said they were becoming more skeptical. Although participant 8 favored urgent causes more than relevant causes, he later said that "When I think about it more, there's a possibility that it's just a marketing strategy. They don't have the real intention or motives to pursue the target that they're aiming at." Meanwhile, participant 9 also shared the opinion that outsourcing to another entity to carry out the donation

process is not trustworthy. While both participants doubted whether choosing a low-fit but urgent cause was simply a marketing tactic, they still hope that the company can manage to devote some resources to support that cause.

Participant 1 and 5, who have a negative impression towards a low fit, said that they wouldn't purchase products linked to such cause. However, participant 1 said that he would make an exception if it's his favorite brand – Nike. The remaining 10 participants continued to say that their purchase decisions are based on the importance of the cause, and thus a low fit wouldn't have a negative impact.

Attitude towards low brand-cause fit	Number of participants
Positive	0
Negative	2 (Participant 1, 5)
Neutral	8
Skeptical	2 (Participant 8, 9)

Table 7 Responses to low brand-cause fit

4.3.3 Recommendations for companies with low brand-cause fit

The results presented in the previous section confirmed that there are 4 participants (33.33%) who expressed skeptical and negative views towards a low brand-cause fit. Yet, as discussed in the literature review, not every company can manage to find a logical cause that matches perfectly with its brand image. Thus, the participants were asked to give suggestions for such companies.

Many recommended that brands should elaborate more clearly regarding why they choose to endorse a particular cause and how they're going to implement the donation process. In other words, companies should be more transparent in their advertisements (Participant 1, 3, 6, 10). Participant 3 said that transparency is very important as most Vietnamese consumers don't trust that their money would come directly to the people in need. Participant 6 and 10 emphasized that companies should be as detailed as possible because that increases the credibility of the companies as well as their CRM campaigns.

Another suggestion is supporting a social cause that is relevant to the target customers (Participant 4, 7). For example, participant 7 said that if a brand targets mostly mothers then a program supporting children or single moms is highly recommended.

A few participants also proposed partnering with a relevant NGO/NPO (Participant 8, 12). Participant 8 said that by cooperating with an organization that is relevant to the cause, the company can gain credibility from its partner and make the brand-cause link appear more relevant and understandable.

Meanwhile, participant 5 said that the brand-cause link should be as relevant as possible. If a company can't find a cause that is directly related to their product, they can go "up and down their logistics chain" to find a suitable cause. For example, a tobacco company can support tobacco farmers. However, some participants were concerned that such cause is unable to elicit emotional responses from customers. Thus, participant 8, 9, 11 suggested that supporting an urgent social cause is a safe solution for any company as it's easier to evoke emotional responses. At the same time, the moderator raised the concern that sometimes the company might be unsure about which cause to endorse and asked if letting consumers choose the cause from a list of potential options is plausible. The participants were quite reluctant regarding this suggestion. While they all said "maybe" to the question, it's still a vague answer without much conviction since it's hard for participants to imagine how this would turn out in a real-life situation.

Overall, many plausible suggestions were raised such as being transparent, choosing a cause relevant to target customers, partnering with a NGO/NPO that is connected to the cause, and supporting urgent causes. However, two recommendations, which are supporting a cause along the logistics chain and cause-selection, remained debatable as the participants were unsure about their effectiveness.

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter's ultimate aim is to answer the research questions stated in the introduction chapter by discussing the findings in relation to the literature review. This chapter is structured in a way that corresponds with the conceptual framework, examining how brand-cause fit leads to cognitive elaboration as well as how fit, customer perceived value, and other minor factors affect attitude towards brand-cause link and purchase intention. Finally, a summarized comparison between the findings and the conceptual framework is given to highlight the most significant points.

5.1 Brand-cause fit and customers' attitude towards brand-cause link

5.1.1 Cognitive elaboration

Brand-cause fit is a highly debated topic in the context of cause-related marketing. The literature review showed two opposite viewpoints on the way customers perceive brand-cause fit. On one hand, there's an argument that customers go through a cognitive elaboration process to evaluate the fit, before finally deciding whether to accept or reject the brand-cause link (Trimble & Holmes, 2013). On the other hand, Hamlin and Wilson (2004) rejected that belief and asserted that consumers barely attempt to rationalize brand-cause fit. In this thesis, results showed a rather similar phenomenon to that put forward by Hamlin and Wilson. As mentioned in the findings chapter, only one participant (Participant 5) evaluated the fit carefully and one other (Participant 6) briefly considered it. Meanwhile, the rest admitted they didn't involve in any cognitive elaboration process to evaluate the fit. Thus, this cognitive elaboration theory only applied to two out of twelve participants, which is not enough to be considered a valid proposition in this case. However, since this study was conducted on a small scale with a limited sample, the result can't necessarily disprove the cognitive elaboration theory. Instead, the fact that two participants actually consciously evaluated the fit suggests that a more extended research is needed to fully measure the validity of this theory.

At the same time, Nan and Heo (2007) shared a quite similar proposition to that of Hamlin and Wilson (2004), claiming that endorsing any good cause can benefit a company regardless of the level of fit. This statement is also supported by Trimble and Holmes (2013), who suggested that it's more important for a brand-cause link to be

accepted on face value than to be considered well-fit. Good causes are usually characterized as being widespread, popular, and urgent. This argument is in fact quite valid in the context of this thesis. During the choice-selection activity, many participants shared that they chose a cause because they believed that such cause can send a positive message (Participant 1, 6, 10 supporting “Challenged Athletes Foundation”) or help a lot of people overcome an urgent global issue (Participant 4, 8, 9 supporting clean water scarcity). Those two social causes are of different level of fit, yet they are still equally supported. While each participant has a subjective idea of what a “good” cause should be, it does show that a “good” cause, which is not necessarily a high-fit cause, tends to generate great returns. However, it’s the company’s task to determine what is a good cause to endorse, which can be achieved by market research.

On the other hand, there is another aspect of this cognitive elaboration theory that was proven to be quite valid through this study. Trimble and Holmes (2013) said that as consumers elaborate more on the fit, they’re likely to make more judgements and consequently reject the brand-cause link. When asked about brand-cause fit, participant 8 and 9, who both chose to support “clean water scarcity” (a low fit), initially said that the level of fit didn’t significantly concern them. However, as the discussion went on and some other participants raised negative issues surrounding a low fit, both participant 8 and 9 started to feel skeptical. Participant 8 said “When I think about it more, there’s a possibility that it’s just a marketing strategy,” to which participant 9 also agreed. As both participants elaborated more on the fit, they started to doubt that Toms had no real intention to support people who lack access to clean water as such issue is not within Toms’ field of expertise. Overall, the cognitive elaboration theory is valid in the sense that people involved in it are more likely to reject the brand-cause link, especially a low-fit one, than those who aren’t.

5.1.2 High versus low brand-cause fit

The general consensus, as brought up in the literature review, is that a high brand-cause fit will generate positive responses from consumers while a low one would lead to the opposite result. This has been proven to be true to a certain extent through this study. Below is a table summarizing the results as already mentioned in the findings chapter.

Attitude	High brand-cause fit	Low brand-cause fit
Positive	2 (Participant 1, 5)	0
Negative	0	2 (Participant 1, 5)
Neutral	10	8
Skeptical	0	2 (Participant 8, 9)

Table 8 Responses to brand-cause fit

Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) asserted that a high fit indicates a higher competency to help the sponsored cause because the company would have the suitable expertise, skills, products and technologies. This idea was also mentioned by participant 1 and 5, who addressed a bias towards a high fit. They stated that since the business is directly related to the social cause, the company would be able to carry out the donation process on its own instead of relying on an intermediate entity (e.g.: NGO, NPO, etc.) to do the work. Such advantage allows the brand to better monitor the program, prevent possible mishaps, and ensure the quality of the campaign in general. This idea is similar to that of Bigné, Chumpitaz and Currás (2010), who have written that a high brand-cause fit means that the company can effectively manage its CRM initiatives.

On the other hand, a low brand-cause fit didn't receive any specific positive comments. Instead, two participants 1 and 5, who praised a high fit, consequently had a negative impression towards a low fit. Both shared some thoughts similar to what has been discussed in the literature review, which is that a low fit makes consumers become doubtful towards the company's motives, credibility, and also the capability to support the cause (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). In addition, participants 8 and 9, despite supporting a low-fit cause, showed some skepticism towards the real motives behind the company's endorsing an irrelevant social cause. However, they didn't reject the low fit

completely and still believed that the company can somehow manage to do what they promised.

As for the participants who remained neutral to both a high and low brand-cause fit, they shared that fit doesn't matter to them and that they would support whatever cause they feel is right. The fact that the majority of the participants didn't have any preference, to an extent, further supports the argument that consumers don't really evaluate brand-cause fit in the context of CRM.

5.2 The effect of brand-cause fit on consumers' purchase intention

In the previous section, results showed that when addressing high and low brand-cause fit separately, responses towards a high fit are more positive than those towards a low one. The high percentage of neutral opinions, however, suggests that the degree of fit doesn't play a very important role. Despite so, consumers' attitude shouldn't be mistaken with consumers' purchase intention. Thus, this section aims to examine the correlation between fit and consumers' intention to purchase.

First, the choice selection activity's results showed that there were four people who chose options involving a high-fit cause while eight people chose options involving a low-fit cause. While such result doesn't necessarily mean that a low fit is more preferred, it does imply that a low fit doesn't always discourage customers from purchasing the products as mentioned in various literature.

In the choice-selection activity, cause's importance/ urgency was the most popular factor that has influenced participants' decisions. At the same time, all participants said they tend to base their decisions on functional value the most in real life. Moreover, participants shared that whatever option can satisfy both criteria mentioned above is worth considering. Thus, it is suggested that when consumers evaluate different options to purchase, they might just evaluate the cause and the brand separately to see if each meets their expectations. This also implies that consumers are less likely to look at both brand and cause as an inseparable combination, thus they might miss out on the fit during their decision making process.

Despite so, it doesn't mean that fit is neglected completely. In fact, all participants admitted they did notice some brand-cause links had a strong connection and some didn't. While most of them then omitted the fit and only two (Participant 5, 6) ended up evaluating it, it showed that fit might have some effects in the first few seconds when participants started forming purchase intention. Participant 8 and 9, who became skeptical of the low fit later on in the discussion, admitted that they were first so drawn to the cause (water scarcity) that they ignored the low fit and didn't think about other problems related to it. This suggests that if those two participants hadn't been distracted by the cause and had paid more attention to the fit, they might not have made the same decision. Overall, it is suggested that fit plays an important but transient role in the early stage of product evaluation.

5.3 The effect of customer perceived value on consumers' attitude and purchase intention

In the literature review, functional value, emotional value, and social value were discussed as being the most important values that influence consumers' behaviors in the context of cause-related marketing. However, during the focus groups, participants shared that they mostly consider functional value and don't pay much attention to the other two. This can be attributed to the economic situation in Vietnam. Since all participants come from the middle class in a developing country, they tend to evaluate very carefully whether the quality of the products they purchase match up with the amount of money they put in. Meanwhile, emotional and social value are considered as "unnecessary" factors that they barely think about. It is also suggested that these two values are a type of "luxury" that can be acquired only if consumers pay a significant amount of money. This is usually the case when it comes to luxurious products, which regular young consumers in Vietnam usually can't afford. Thus, emotional and social value can be examined more in future research that features high-end products in a CRM campaign.

5.4 Different factors that affect attitude towards brand-cause link and purchase intention

As stated before, it is implied that in the first few seconds that participants noticed the brand-cause fit, there might be many factors that encouraged them to either neglect the fit or think more about it. According to the cognitive elaboration theory, brands should prevent consumers from forming too much evaluations towards a brand-cause link as that would most likely to make them reject such link. Instead, brands, especially those who can't find a high-fit cause, should make use of certain factors or contexts that would distract consumers from evaluating the fit.

One factor that was mentioned in the literature review was cause proximity, which means that consumers tend to support causes that directly affect their community. Yet, the findings chapter has pointed out that Vietnamese consumers didn't really think the Vietnamese context improved their purchase intention due to the corruption controversy. Despite so, some participants said that they were drawn to the cause at first because they felt related and surprised. Thus, such emotions can also cause the participants to forget about the low brand-cause fit.

The findings chapter has also listed a few more methods participants believed would reduce the negative effects of a low brand-cause fit. Detailed elaborations on the CRM campaign, for example, might be able to shift participants' attention from the fit to the purpose of the program. This was mentioned in the literature review as corporate message. Other suggestions include endorsing a cause that is relevant to the target customers and collaborating with a NGO/NPO that focuses on supporting a particular social cause, both of which haven't been discussed in the literature review. In these cases, participants' attention might shift from brand-cause fit to consumers-cause fit or partner-cause fit. Some participants also recommend brands to just go with the currently most urgent social cause in a specific region or on a global scale. Overall, when participants decide that there is an appropriate reason for the brand to support a cause, they might just move on to evaluate other aspects of the product and not question the low brand-cause fit.

Since the above recommendations can mitigate the negative effects of low brand-cause fit and prevent consumers from elaborating on the fit, they might be able to help increase purchase intention. The assumption here is that fit only exerts its effect in the first few seconds of product evaluation. Since it takes place so quickly and perhaps subconsciously, the majority of consumers might not consider fit an important factor after all.

5.5 Comparisons between findings and conceptual framework

Cumulating the discussion above, it is also necessary to examine how the findings support or contradict with the conceptual framework presented earlier in the literature review (see Figure 1, page 16).

Indeed, the results do validate the conceptual framework in most parts. It confirms that cognitive elaboration is an optional step after consumers first notice brand-cause fit. Then, customer perceived value, especially functional value, is evaluated. This is a very powerful factor that can influence consumers' attitude. For example, if a consumer initially perceives the fit as low and also recognizes many negative implications of a low fit, he or she might develop better impression towards the brand-cause link upon perceiving the values provided by the products. Such positive impression can also be enhanced by other minor factors such as familiarity with a cause, cause's importance, and corporate message, as already mentioned in the previous chapter. Consequently, a positive attitude towards the brand-cause link can increase the intention to purchase the product.

On the other hand, the findings showed some minor points that contradict with the conceptual framework. First, while cause proximity was considered a powerful factor that boosts purchase intention, the results show that such belief isn't valid in Vietnam. However, since this is due to the social context of Vietnam where corruption hinders philanthropic works, this contradicting point can't necessarily reject the impact of cause proximity as a whole. Thus, future research might consider examining this factor in a less corrupt country. Secondly, cause-selection remains debatable since the participants could not imagine such situation in real life to give a concrete opinion, although the literature review praised this tactic. Lastly, the focus group didn't investigate how brand consciousness influences attitudes towards brand-cause link.

Since brand consciousness is an element that most people aren't fully aware of, it would be a challenge to examine this in a qualitative research. Thus, this factor should be studied in a quantitative research instead.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Main findings

Brand-cause fit has long been a rather contentious topic in the context of cause-related marketing. Researchers argue not only if consumers place much emphasis on brand-cause fit but also if a high fit is more well-received than a low one. Since this study is using qualitative data collected on a small scale, there's no sufficient evidence to support any viewpoint mentioned above. However, the results of this study have, to a certain extent, answered the stated research questions to find out how young Vietnamese consumers perceive the value of brand-cause fit.

Firstly, regarding the influence of high (versus low) brand-cause fit on consumers' purchase intentions, the study does show that a high fit tends to receive more positive response than a low fit does in terms of consumers' perception. Despite so, brand-cause fit only has a very transient effect on purchase intention. That influence takes place in the early stage of product evaluation, which might or might not lead to cognitive elaboration. Consumers who don't engage in cognitive elaboration of the fit tend to overlook this issue, while those who do are likely to become skeptical towards a low fit, which consequently decreases purchase intention.

Secondly, the study has discovered some factors or contexts that can alter the way consumers evaluate brand-cause fit by distracting them from scrutinizing the low fit. Results show that consumers are likely to support a cause they perceive as the most urgent or important. Moreover, brands can alter the way consumers evaluate fit by supporting a cause relevant to target consumers or collaborating with an appropriate partner/NGO/NPO to conduct the CRM initiative.

The findings also support the conceptual framework in terms of how purchase intention is formed. Brand-cause fit, then cognitive elaboration (optional), and then customer perceived value together affect consumers' attitude towards the brand-cause link, which ultimately leads to purchase intention. Nevertheless, the findings contradict or fail to support some minor factors that affect purchase intention. However, these issues can still be examined clearly in a more extensive research.

6.2 Implications for International Business

While this research can't reach a highly reliable conclusion for marketing practitioners to apply in their works due to its limited sample, it does elicit a few reasonable suggestions to improve CRM campaigns for companies that wish to attract young consumers in Vietnam through cause-related marketing.

First, young Vietnamese consumers have always considered price the most important criterion when weighing between different options. Thus, brand-cause fit, after all, plays a very small role. The extent of brand-cause fit's influence depends largely on the product's price range and its target customers. For expensive and high-quality products that are mostly purchased by well-educated upper-class youngsters, brand-cause fit is likely to cause a big difference. This is because these types of products are usually considered to have a high quality, thus consumers would pay more attention to others aspects that can create more value to the products. While there are many factors that can be considered, brand-cause fit is one worth considering as well-educated consumers tend to be concerned about whether their donation can make an impact. On the other hand, brand-cause fit might not make any difference for low-price consumer goods and necessities, especially for well-known brands such as Unilever or P&G. Since Vietnamese consumers already rely on these brands for daily supplies, a low brand-cause fit wouldn't make any difference to their purchase decision. Despite so, a well-planned CRM campaign might still elicit positive impression towards the brands. Overall, marketers need to know their brands' positioning to make the most optimal decisions.

Secondly, young Vietnamese consumers aren't necessarily attracted to social causes in Vietnam, although they can be effective in attracting customers' attention. Instead, many people prefer causes that have a regional or global scale to help as many people as possible. Therefore, a highly suggestible solution is to endorse social causes in Vietnam and the surrounding regions then provide more information regarding how the company will conduct the donation process. Such transparency might be able to reduce the skepticism of suspecting consumers.

6.3 Limitation and suggestions for future research

It's important to address certain limitations of this research to better understand the impact of the result and to ensure collection of more useful data in the future.

Firstly, the sample is limited in terms of age, education level, income, and location. All participants are from 19 to 23 years old while consumers until the age of 29 can still be considered young in Vietnam. As all participants are non-working college students, their mindsets, price consciousness, as well as attitude towards donation in general only represent a very small fraction of Vietnamese consumers. Not only so, people across Vietnam are very different in their lifestyles while the participants taking part in this study are all from urban areas. Thus, future research should extend and diversify their sample to gain more representative results that correctly depict the target group.

Secondly, the research design also poses some limitations that restricted the scope of what can be explored. Apart from those by Toms Shoes, the other four options in the choice-selection activity are fictional CRM campaigns. Due to this, there weren't any official materials such as logos, posters, promotion videos, etc. to help participants make more realistic decisions and give more constructive opinions. Moreover, the choice-selection activity only examines one type of product and fails to include other categories such as FMCG or high-end products. Thus, future studies can attempt using real-life representative examples from different types of companies to achieve a more comprehensive result that marketing practitioners across divergent industries can utilize.

Lastly, time and location limitation narrowed down the scope of this study overall. There wasn't enough time to conduct more focus groups, which would have strengthened the findings to a great extent. Also, since this research is conducted in Finland, it was difficult to organize market research to gain more insights into how CRM campaigns are performing in Vietnam. Hence, future studies, if possible, should be taken in Vietnam in order to take full advantage of the local human resources. Researchers can conduct studies over a long period of time, investigate sales of CRM-products, and interview young consumers on the spot as they're evaluating or have already purchased CRM - products in stores, supermarkets, etc. Doing so would produce more realistic results that can be easily applied by marketing practitioners.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Moderator script for focus group:

Introduction:

Welcome and thank you very much for joining me today for this focus group. I'm Thao and I will be the moderator for our discussion today. You were invited to participate because your profiles match with my thesis' target group. I know you're very busy with your schoolwork and I appreciate your participation a lot.

Purpose:

This focus group aims to collect qualitative data for my bachelor's thesis on cause-related marketing. Your participation is valuable as it would guide me to the next step of the thesis process.

Ground rules:

The expected duration of this session is 2 hours. To make sure that the conversation flow smoothly, here are a few ground rules you should keep in mind throughout the whole discussion:

1. Only one person speaks at a time. If you have anything to add, please wait until that person has finished.
2. While you should respect each other's opinion, don't be afraid to comment on each other's remarks even when you have contradictory views. There's no right or wrong answers and every opinion is appreciated equally.
3. Please refrain from side conversations.
4. I hope to hear each of you contribute to our discussion today. I might directly ask you to speak up if I haven't heard from you for a while.
5. The discussion will be conducted in English. However, feel free to use Vietnamese to express any thoughts that you find difficult to say in English.
6. The discussion will be taped as I do not want to miss any valuable idea. Rest assured that what you say today will remain confidential and no name will be mentioned in the final report.

Do you have any question so far?

Part I: Ice-breaking and choice selection

Before we start, I'd like each of you to take turn introducing yourselves. You can tell us about your names, class, your hobbies, your favourite movies, etc.

Do you think you have purchased a product because sales of that product is linked to supporting a social cause?

Now, let's begin our discussion.

First, I want you to image yourselves going shopping at a mall and looking for a new pair of sneakers. Now, please take a look at the six flashcards given to you at the beginning of the session and take 2-3 minutes to skim through them. Suppose that all of these brands have the type of shoes you are looking for, please tell me which of these options you're most likely to purchase. Then, write your names on the corresponding flashcards and put them on the table.

Part II: Discussion

Now, I would like each of you to take turn explaining your choice. I'd also like to know if there is any major factor that has led you to this decision.

Guiding questions:

1. Is any of these brands your favourite brand? Does brand preference influence your purchase decision? Why and how?
2. Are you familiar with any of these causes? Does the cause influence your purchase decision? Why and how?
3. Did you choose the product that supports the cause you value the most? If another brand supports that same cause, would you purchase products from that brand instead?
4. What are some benefits/values you think you can acquire from purchasing this product?
5. Why are those benefits/values important to you? Do those benefits/values influence your purchase decision? Why and how?
6. What are your feelings when you see Adidas supporting a social cause in Vietnam?

7. How much do you think the Vietnamese context of the cause has influenced your purchase decision? Would you have made the same decision if Adidas chose to support the same social cause but in another country instead?
8. Do you think there is a logical connection between the brand and cause in the combination you have chosen?
Such connection can be referred to as brand-cause fit, which is the degree to which a brand matches with its sponsored cause in terms of image or values. Were you aware of this brand-cause fit when you evaluated these choices? Did you elaborate on the brand-cause fit during your decision making process?
9. Does brand-cause fit influence your purchase decision? Why and how?
10. For those who criticize a low brand-cause fit, can you suggest some ways for brands to reduce the negative effects of a low-fit cause?
11. So far, we have discussed about brand-cause fit, cause's context, cause's importance and familiarity to you, brand preference, perceived benefits/value. What do you think is the most important factor that has influenced your purchase decision? Is there any other factor you would like to add?
12. What do you think are the most important criteria brands should consider when choosing a cause to endorse?

Closing:

Thank you so much for your participation. Your ideas and opinions have definitely helped me gain new perspectives on my thesis topic!